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(54) **SINGLE COLUMN IMMUNOLOGICAL TEST ELEMENTS**

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(71) Applicant: **Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, Inc.**,
Rochester, NY (US)

(72) Inventors: **Raymond F. Jakubowicz**, Rush, NY (US); **Mark Sawczuk**, Rochester, NY (US)

(73) Assignee: **Ortho-Clinical Diagnostics, Inc.**,
Rochester, NY (US)

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(58) **Field of Classification Search**

None

See application file for complete search history.

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Primary Examiner — Chris L Chin

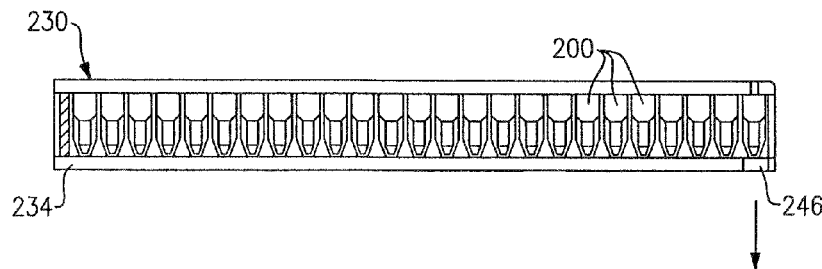
(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm* — Barclay Damon, LLP

(57)

ABSTRACT

A plurality of individual single column test elements are provided for use in a clinical testing apparatus in an open-topped cartridge in which each test element is defined by a single test column that includes a quantity of a test material, such as gel material or a bead matrix, including a cover strip used to access the contents of the test column. The number of individual test elements provided in a cartridge can be varied, depending on the test(s) to be performed.

11 Claims, 4 Drawing Sheets



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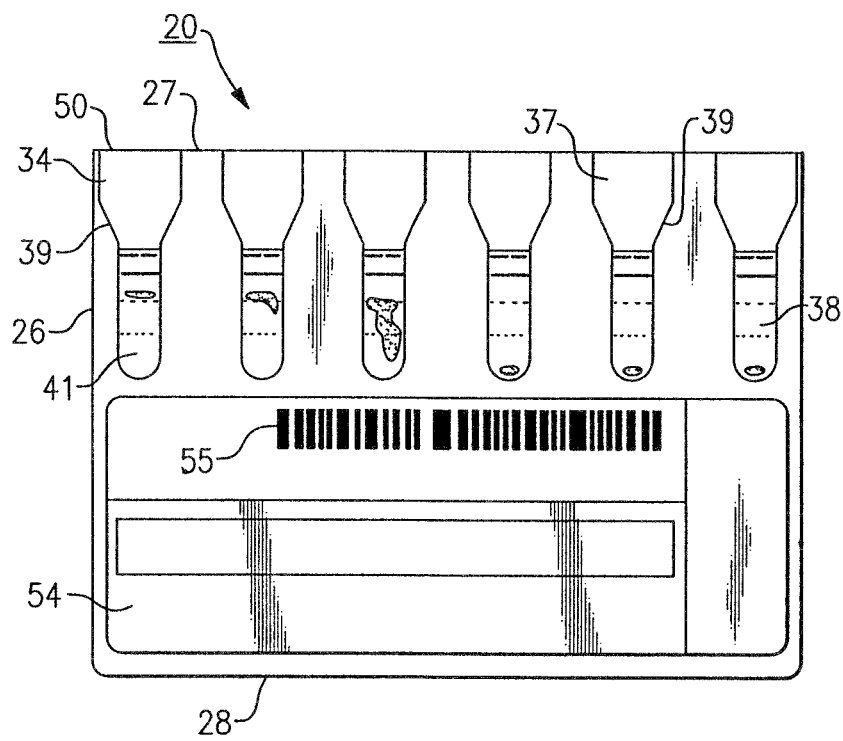
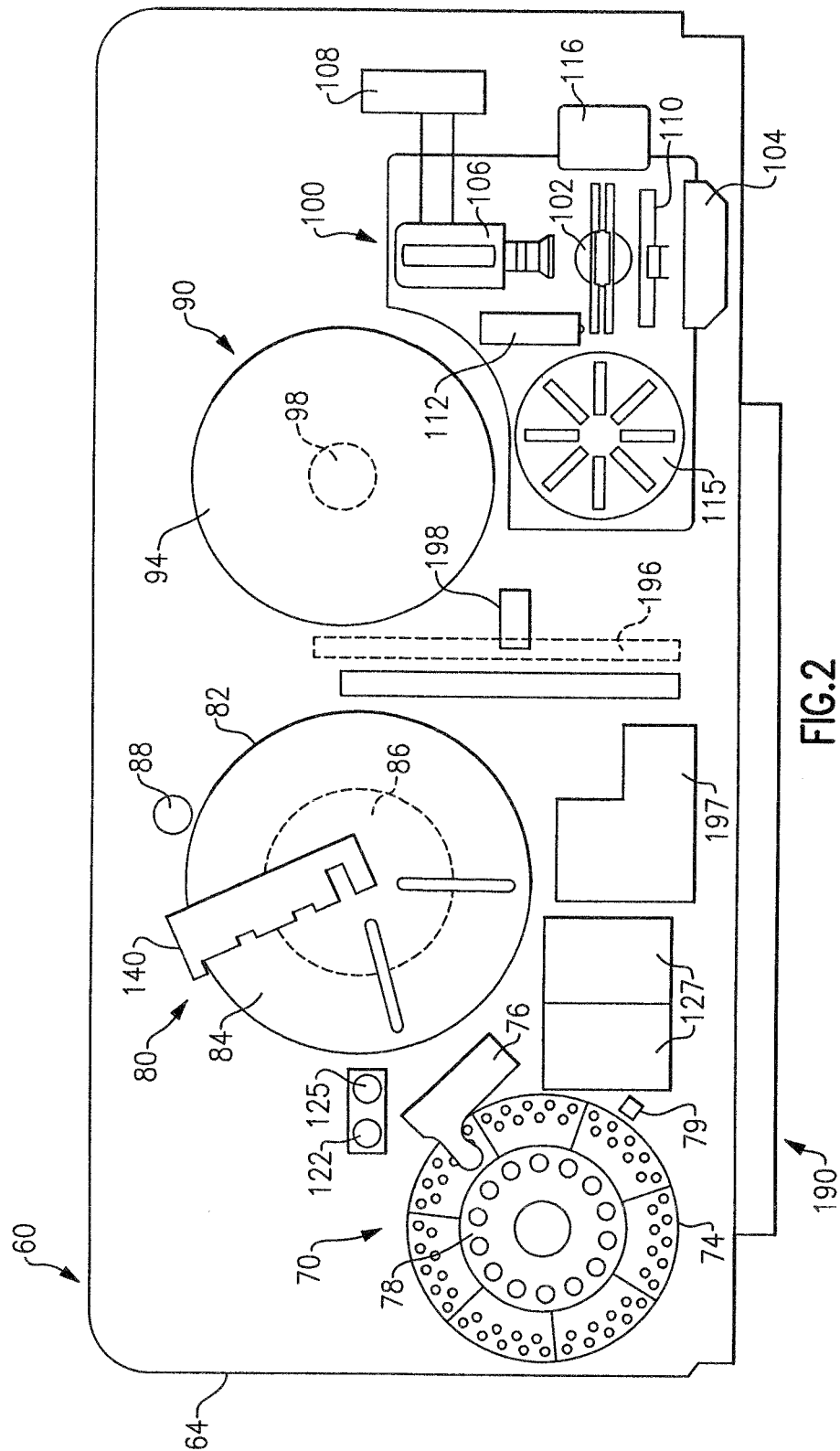


FIG. 1



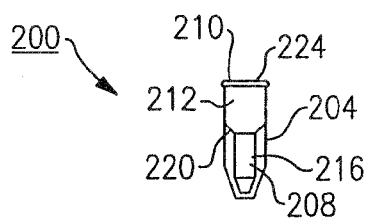


FIG. 3

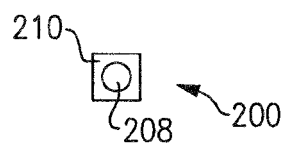


FIG. 4

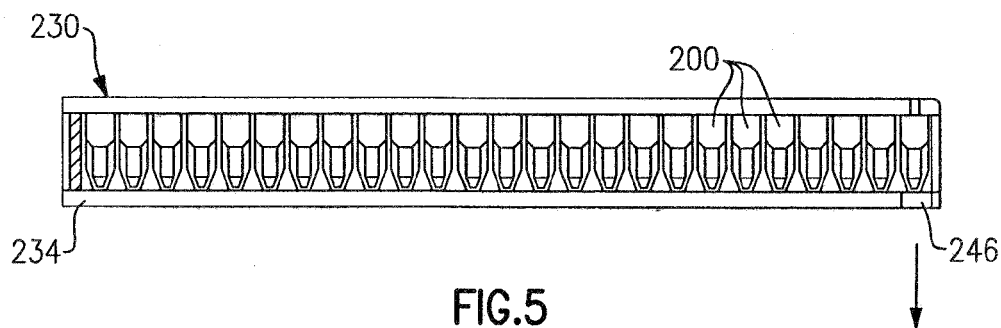


FIG. 5

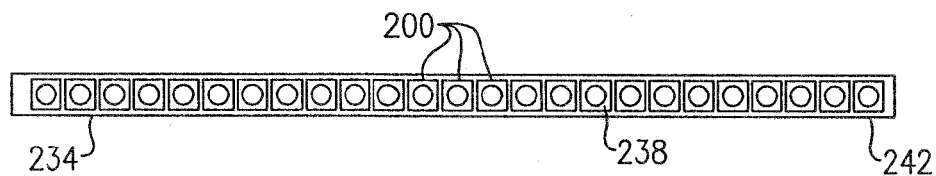


FIG. 6

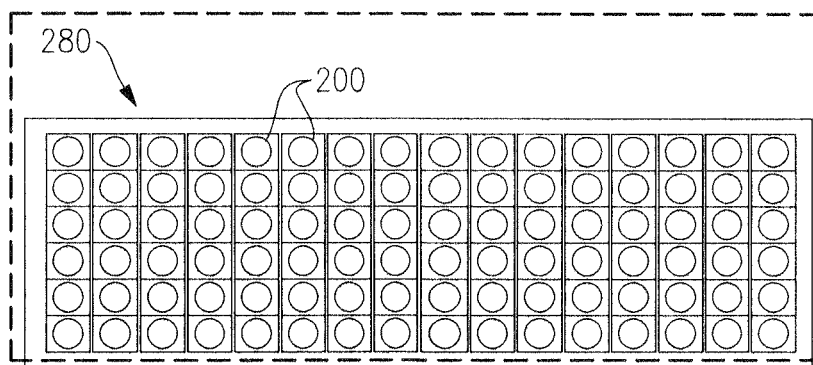


FIG. 7

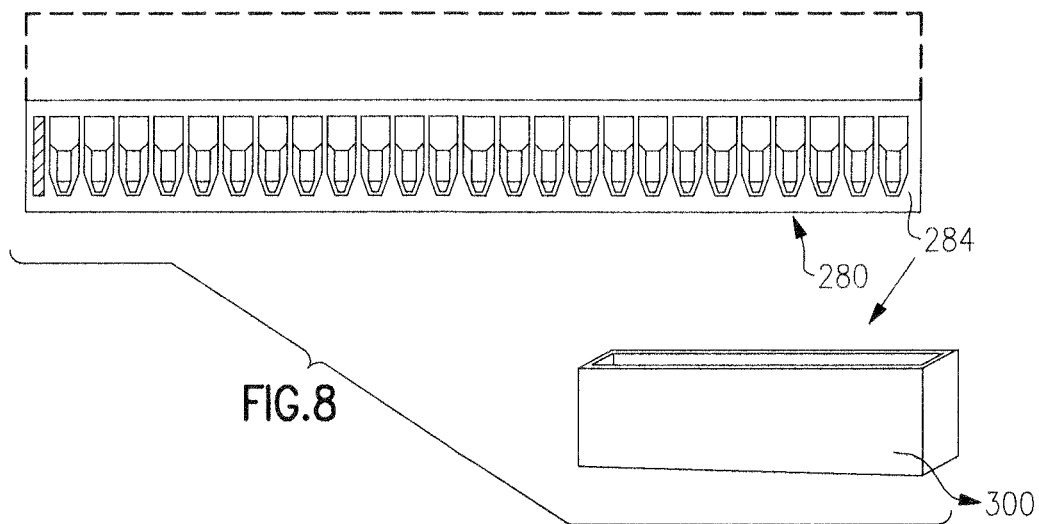


FIG. 8

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SINGLE COLUMN IMMUNOLOGICAL TEST ELEMENTS

CROSS REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application claims domestic priority upon U.S. application Ser. No. 13/305,086, filed Nov. 28, 2011, which is a divisional application of U.S. application Ser. No. 12/175,590, (now U.S. Pat. No. 8,076,126), filed Jul. 18, 2008 and pursuant to applicable portions of 35 U.S.C. §120. The contents of each of these documents are entirely incorporated herein.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

This invention relates to the field of immunodiagnostic testing and more specifically to a test element defined by a single disposable column or reaction well that can be used as a replacement for a multiple fixed column gel card or bead cassette test element. Single element columns can be dispensed and used either individually or selectively in groups depending on a specific test or application.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Conventionally, it is known to utilize test elements such as gel cards or bead cassettes for blood grouping, antigen or antibody testing, or other related immunohematological applications or uses. These test elements commonly include a planar substrate that supports a plurality of optically transparent and vertically arranged columns or reaction wells. Each of the reaction wells retain a quantity of an inert material, such as glass beads or a gel material, that is mixed within a suspension having an antigen or antibody or is bound therewith. In use in automation, an upper foil layer of at least one card or cassette is pierced or removed, permitting access to the contents of at least one of the reaction wells of the test element for adding patient sample. The sample is then incubated and centrifuged to accelerate an agglutination reaction by means of column agglutination technology (CAT) in which bound red blood cells clump and are filtered by the inert material matrix. The cards or cassettes are usually prearranged and include a fixed and predetermined number of columns to enable a test of interest (e.g., direct or indirect Coombs test, Rh blood typing, ABO blood typing) to be completed.

There may be instances or examples in which all columns of a test card or test cassette may not be necessary in order to conduct a test of interest. However, such test elements, once at least one column thereof is pierced, are often disposed of and not reused, even if available unpierced reaction wells remain in a test element creating unnecessary waste and expense. Moreover, there are a number of situations in which varying the number of test columns is advantageous. Therefore, there is a need to provide versatility as to the types of test elements available, particularly in automated test apparatus.

There is also a general and prevailing need in the field to reduce the overall footprint of automated testing systems, including those systems that employ test elements, such as those that are noted above. To that end, providing any suitable means for reducing or economizing the size of a test element, for storage or otherwise, would be greatly desired.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

According to one version, there is provided a test element for use in an immunodiagnostic test apparatus, said test

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element comprising a single reaction well having an inert material disposed therein as well as a suspension containing an antigen or antibody or a carrier-bound antigen or antibody and a wrap or seal covering the reaction well. The seal according to one version is selectively pierceable in order to permit access to the contents of the reaction well.

According to another aspect, there is provided a cartridge comprising a frame that retains a plurality of test elements, each said test element comprising a single reaction well having an inert material disposed therein as well as a suspension containing an antigen or antibody or a carrier-bound antibody or antigen as well as a wrap or seal covering the reaction well. The cartridge dispenses the individual test elements for use, whether individually or selectively in any useful number, providing significant versatility and improving overall throughput.

According to another aspect, there is provided an automated testing apparatus comprising a test element supply including a plurality of single column test elements.

Preferably, the automated testing apparatus further includes an incubator and a centrifuge that are each enabled for handling the individual single column test elements whether the test elements are handled individually or within cartridges containing selectively variable numbers of said test elements. As such, the testing apparatus can be configured to operate with a plurality of cartridges between components or modules of the testing apparatus or to provide different assays in conjunction with a test card.

One advantage is a realized reduction in storage capacity volume that can be achieved using the above noted individual test elements in an automated test apparatus, wherein this reduction can be greater than 50 percent.

Another advantage realized is that the individualized test elements provide truly random access capability and scheduling in an automated testing apparatus. In addition, throughput enhancement is realized due to reduction in the waiting time for batches.

Yet another advantage realized is cartridge-based packaging of individualized or single column test elements permits easier loading and handling of test elements than found in previously known testing systems.

Still another advantage is that providing individualized test elements insures that there is no reuse of unused columns as in present test elements.

Yet still another advantage provided herein is that the individual test elements enable an extremely small and efficient footprint to be provided in conjunction with test apparatus including those of test element storage, as well as permitting enhanced designs to components and modules used in typical testing apparatus including, for example, centrifuges, incubators, transport assemblies, readers and other components.

The present design is largely facilitated to automated processes and provides better safety as a result. However, the herein described concepts can also be applied to manual based test systems.

These and other features and advantages will become readily apparent from the following Detailed Description, which should be read in conjunction with the accompanying drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a front view of a prior art immunodiagnostic test element;

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FIG. 2 is a top plan view of a prior art automated test apparatus that utilizes at least test elements, such as those depicted according to FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a front view of a single column test element in accordance with one embodiment;

FIG. 4 is a top plan view of the single column test element of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is a side view of a linear array cartridge of single column test elements of FIGS. 3 and 4;

FIG. 6 is a top plan view of the cartridge of FIG. 5;

FIG. 7 is a front view of a single element dispensing cartridge in accordance with another embodiment; and

FIG. 8 is a top plan view of the dispensing cartridge of FIG. 7.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

The following discussion relates to a compact consumable test element for patient or other sample testing as well as applications for the single column test element, preferably for use in conjunction with automated test apparatus. It will be apparent to those of sufficient skill from the following description that numerous variations and modifications are possible within the intended scope of the concepts described. In addition, certain terms such as “top”, “bottom”, “above”, “below” and the like are used herein in order to provide a suitable frame of reference with regard to the accompanying drawings. These terms, however, are not intended to be overly limiting, except where so specifically indicated.

Referring to FIG. 1, there is shown a prior art test element 20 in the form of a so-called “gel card” or “bead cassette”. This element 20 is commonly defined by a planar substrate made from a durable plastic material 26, the substrate having a top side 27 and an opposing bottom side 28. The substrate 26 supports a plurality of optically transparent and vertically arranged test columns or reaction wells 34, each of the reaction wells also being made from a plastic material. In the embodiment shown, a total of six (6) reaction wells 34 are integrally formed within the substrate 26. Each of the reaction wells 34 are further defined by an upper portion 37 having an inner diameter that is significantly larger than that of a lower portion 41. A transitional portion 39 having an inwardly tapering diameter interconnects the upper and lower portions 37, 41. A quantity of an inert material (not shown), such as glass beads or gel material, is provided preferably by the manufacturer within the lower portion 41 of each column, this material being mixed with an antigen or antibody or a carrier-bound antibody or antigen typically in an aqueous suspension or medium. A seal or wrap 50 is attached, such as a pierceable foil, covering the top side 27 of the test element 20 that, when pierced or removed, selectively permits access to the contents of the reaction wells 34. The test element 20 further includes a label 54 located beneath the reaction wells 34 on a front facing side thereof, the label including a bar-coded portion 55, the label and bar-coded portion each including items such as lot number, test type, expiration date, place of manufacture and other information. Additional details relating to the above test elements 20 can be found in U.S. Pat. Nos. 5,512,436, the entire contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

The herein described immunodiagnostic test element 20 can be used in an automated testing apparatus 60, such as that shown in FIG. 2. In brief and according to this prior art embodiment the testing apparatus 60 includes a frame 64 that retains a number of components including a reagent and

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sample supply 70, an incubator station 80, a centrifuge 90, an analysis station 100, and a drawer assembly 190. More particularly, the sample and reagent supply 70 of this specific apparatus 60 includes a sample rack 74 as well as a reagent rack 78, each of which contain bottles or vials of patient sample and reagent, respectively. The reagent and sample supply 70 is constructed as a rotor that is rotatable about a center axis by means of a drive mechanism that includes a motor (not shown in this view), wherein a bar code reader 79 is further provided in relation to the reagent and sample supply 70 as well as a tube hold-down assembly 76 disposed over a portion thereof.

The incubator station 80 includes a cassette rack 82 that further includes respective first and second sections 84, 86, as well as a drive mechanism including a motor 88 that selectively rotates each of the sections about a center axis. The centrifuge 90 is known to those in the field and includes a rotor 94 and a motor 98 enabling reactant contained within supported cards to be spun down by centrifugation. The analysis station 100 includes holding means 102, illumination means 104, an imaging subsystem 106, a processing subsystem 108, a transport subsystem 110, a storage rack 115, a bar code reader 112, and a waste receptacle 116. The drawer assembly 190 includes a drawer (not shown), a slide tray (not shown), a motor (not shown), a sensor bar 196, a bar code reader 198 and a holding area 197. A transport assembly (not shown) of the testing apparatus 60 includes a robot arm and a gripper. Finally, a pipette assembly includes a gantry-type pipette that is attached to a robot arm 128, this assembly further including shallow and deep wash areas 122, 125, as well as cell dilution packs 127.

In the testing apparatus 60 shown, for example, a plurality of test elements 20, such as those previously described according to FIG. 1, are initially supported within the drawer and are read by the bar code reader 198. Assuming the read of the test element 20 is successful, the test elements 20 are loaded by means of the transport assembly (not shown) and the gripper into the cassette rack 82 of the incubator 80. A piercing assembly (not shown) is disposed above the first and second sections 84, 86 of the cassette rack 82 of the incubator station 80 and includes a support subassembly having a slide support (not shown) defined by a plurality of puncture needles that are reciprocally movable, such as by means of solenoids (not shown). The incubator station 80, as driven by the motor 88, is used to incubate patient sample added to each of the test columns 34 from one of the vials of the sample rack 74, the incubator further including the assembly 76 that holds down the sample and reagent vials. The pipette of the pipette assembly is used to aspirate sample from the sample rack 74, while the piercing assembly (not shown) is used to puncture each of the reaction wells 34 of the then-incubated test elements 20. Once the puncturing step has been completed, the pipette 124 can then be used to dispense a predetermined quantity of patient sample (and possibly additional reagents) from the sample and reagent supply 70 into each of the reaction wells 34, FIG. 1, wherein the mixture can be suitably incubated.

Following incubation and in the described testing apparatus 60, the test elements 20 are removed from the incubator station 80 by means of the transport assembly to the centrifuge 90 wherein the test elements are then spun down, thereby accelerating an agglutination reaction as red blood cells are clumped together in the presence of coated reagents. The plurality of beads disposed in each reaction well 34 of the test element 20 includes particles having diameters ranging between about 10 and 100 microns, providing a matrix for the red blood cells, but not the heavier

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formed agglutinates to pass through by filtering. The resulting reaction can be imaged within the analysis station **100** of the testing apparatus **60** by means of the illumination assembly **104** and imaging subsystem **106**, the latter being connected to the processing subsystem **108** having machine vision for grading of the reaction. Additional details concerning the foregoing testing apparatus **60**, including its mode of operation, are provided in commonly-assigned U.S. Pat. No. 5,578,269 to Yaremko et al., the entire contents of which are herein incorporated by reference.

To that end, each station of the testing apparatus **60**, such as the incubator station **80**, centrifuge **90** and analysis station **100**, must therefore accommodate the test elements **20** and as a result these stations must each be sized appropriately in order to retain same. In the above test apparatus **60**, the individual modules must therefore accommodate the entire test card or element **20**, FIG. **1**, even if all of the columns of the test element are not actually used or required for testing.

With the preceding background and referring to FIGS. **3** and **4**, there is shown a consumable test element **200** made in accordance with a first embodiment. The test element **200** is defined by a compact body **204** preferably made from a lightweight plastic moldable material that is further defined by a single vertically arranged column or test chamber **208** therein. The column **208** extends downwardly from a top side **210** of the element **200** and is further defined by an upper section **212** having an inner diameter that is significantly larger than that of a lower section **216**. An inwardly tapering transitional section **220** is disposed between the upper section **212** and the lower section **216**. The test element **200**, and more particularly the test column **208**, is optically transparent for purposes of detection of reactions occurring therein. A quantity of an inert material (not shown), such as beads or gel material, is added to the lower section **216** of the test column **208** along with a reagent that includes an antigen or antibody or a carrier-bound antigen or antibody formed in an aqueous slurry or medium. A wrap **224** is also added to the top side **210** of the element **200**, such as a foil that is adhesively or otherwise attached, to effectively seal the contents of the column **208** in a manner that is commonly known and to protect the contents from contamination. The wrap **224** is preferably and selectively pierceable to access the contents of the element **200**.

Referring to FIG. **5** and according to the present embodiment, a plurality (e.g., at least two) of the above-described single column test elements **200** can be individually fitted within a cassette or cartridge **230**. The cartridge **230** is defined, according to this embodiment, by a frame **234** having exterior surfaces including a bottom surface and a set of lateral surfaces that are formed in a substantially rectangular configuration, which combine to form an enclosure. The frame **234** according to this embodiment is sized to maintain a predetermined number of test elements **200** in close fitting and adjacent relation with each other in a linear array **238**. The number of test elements **200** that are retained as a cartridge can easily be varied depending on the dimensions of the frame **234** that is used. According to this embodiment, the lateral walls of the frame **234** are defined by a height dimension that is essentially equal to that of the test elements **200**. In this instance and referring to FIGS. **5** and **6**, twenty five (25) test elements **200** are arranged in a one-dimensional linear array **238** for dispensing, such as within an automated testing apparatus (not shown). Moreover, the linear array **238** as shown, permits the test elements **200** to be individually dispensed from an end position **242** of the frame **234** through an appropriately sized slot **246** wherein the cartridge defined herein can function as a test

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element supply. Therefore and in the array **238** depicted, a test element **200** is ejected vertically through the slot **246**, but it will be readily understood by those of adequate skill in the field that the array can assume other configurations such that test elements **200** can be dispensed, for example, horizontally.

In an alternate version, the test elements **200** can also be separately arranged, for example, within a cartridge that like the preceding is defined by a frame sized to permit storage of a plurality of the above described single element test elements. For example, and as shown in FIGS. **7** and **8**, a cartridge **280** is defined by a frame **284** that is sized to maintain a two dimensional array of test elements **200** wherein the test elements can be individually dispensed therefrom. In this specific version, ninety six (96) test elements **200** can be retained in close fitting and adjacent relation within the confines of an assemblage having 16 columns and 6 rows totaling 96 test elements, though the specific number of columns and rows can easily be varied depending of the use required and the test apparatus. In this latter version, test elements **200** can actually be repackaged within at least one smaller frame that are sized to retain a specific number of test elements (e.g. 2-8 test elements) depending on the test that is to be performed.

In another version, the test elements can be dispensed from either of the previously described frames into a separate test cartridge **300** that is sized to retain a predetermined number (e.g., greater than two) of test elements **200**. As such, the cartridge **300** can be adequately sized to retain any number of test elements wherein the entire cartridge can be loaded and unloaded into modules of the test apparatus (e.g., incubator, centrifuge, etc).

PARTS LIST FOR FIGS. 1-8

20 test element
26 substrate, planar
27 top side
28 bottom side
32 inert material
34 reaction wells or microcolumns
37 upper portion
39 transitional portion
41 lower portion
50 seal or wrap
54 label
55 bar-coded portion
60 testing apparatus, automated
64 frame
70 sample and reagent supply
74 sample rack
78 reagent rack
79 bar-code reader
80 incubator station
84 first section
86 second section
88 motor
90 centrifuge
94 rotor
98 motor
100 analysis station
102 holding means
104 illumination assembly
106 imaging subsystem
108 processing subsystem
110 transport subsystem
112 bar code reader

115 storage rack
 116 waste receptacle
 122 shallow wash area
 125 deep wash area
 127 cell dilution packs
 128 robot arm
 190 drawer assembly
 195 motor
 196 sensor bar
 197 holding area
 198 barcode reader
 200 test element
 204 compact body
 208 test chamber or column
 210 top side
 212 upper section
 216 lower section
 220 transitional section
 224 wrap
 230 cartridge
 234 frame
 238 linear array
 242 end position
 246 slot
 280 cartridge
 284 frame
 300 cartridge

Though only specific embodiments were described herein, it will be readily apparent that other variations and modifications are possible within the intended ambits of the present invention, according to the following claims.

The invention claimed is:

1. A cartridge for conducting immunological testing, the cartridge comprising:

- a frame defining an enclosure that is sized to receive and maintain a predetermined number of individual test elements in close fitting and adjacent relation with each other in an array; and
- 5 a plurality of the individual test elements releasably retained within the enclosure in a linear array, each of the individual test elements comprising a single test column containing a test material and having a cover strip.
- 10 2. The cartridge as recited in claim 1, wherein each individual test element is made from an optically transparent material.
- 3. The cartridge as recited in claim 2, in which the enclosure is made from an optically transparent material.
- 15 4. The cartridge as recited in claim 1, wherein the contained test material includes a quantity of an inert material.
- 5. The cartridge as recited in claim 4, wherein the inert material is one of glass beads or gel material.
- 6. The cartridge as recited in claim 1, wherein the enclosure is sized and configured to retain between 2 and 8
- 20 individual test elements, the number of individual test elements being dependent on the test(s) to be performed.
- 7. The cartridge as recited in claim 1, in which the cover strip of each test element is pierceable to enable a patient sample to be dispensed into the test column.
- 25 8. The cartridge as recited in claim 7, in which each individual test element is configured to produce a perceivable reaction between the patient sample and test material.
- 9. The cartridge as recited in claim 8, wherein the contained test material further includes a reagent containing at least one of an antibody and an antigen.
- 30 10. The cartridge as recited in claim 9, wherein the reaction is an agglutination reaction.
- 11. The cartridge as recited in claim 1, in which a plurality of the cartridges are used in a clinical immunodiagnostic apparatus.

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